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St. John's Episcopal Church
Williamsboro, N.C.

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St. John's Episcopal Church

(9 miles North of Henderson on State Highway No. 39)

Williamsboro, North Carolina

St. John's Church, Williamsboro, is the only colonial church building standing today in the Diocese of North Carolina. It was built by the Lewis family of Granville County in 1757 and located in the northern part of the county near Nut Bush Creek. Throughout the colonial period it was commonly known as Nut Bush Church. Judge John Williams in 1772 moved the church to its present location which is about one-half mile from the original site. The community which had grown up around the church was incorporated in 1787 and named Williamsboro in honor of Judge Williams.

The General Assembly of North Carolina in 1746 established Granville County and St. John's Parish within the same boundaries. The act also appointed the following persons to serve as its first vestry: William Eaton, William Persons, John Martin, Edward Jones, James Mitchel, James Payne, West Harris, John Wade, William Moore, Samuel Lanier, and Joseph Sims.

The Nut Bush Church was located in this parish until 1758 when the Parish of Granville was formed from the northern part of St. John's. The men named to serve on the vestry for Granville Parish were: Robert Harris, Richard Henderson, Reuben Leary, Henry Howard, Richard Harris, Jr., James Mitchell, Andrew Hampton, Thomas Lowe, Evan Ragland, William Benford, Darwin Elwick, and Sharwood Harris.

The earliest recorded services of the Church of England to be held in Granville County were conducted by the Rev. Clement Hall. He visited the county while on a missionary tour through the colony in the summer of 1749. Although we know that services were held in Granville Parish from time to time, no clergyman was in charge until 1769 when the Rev. James McCartney was appointed rector of the parish by Governor William Tryon.

During the last quarter of the eighteenth century the Rev. Charles Cupples and the Rev. George Micklejohn, S.T.D., held occasional services in Granville Parish.

The membership of the Nut Bush Church during the eighteenth century contained the names of some of North Carolina's most distinguished citizens. Such men as William Eaton, Judge John Williams, Judge Richard Henderson and Colonel Robert Burton were all active in the parish.

From 1800 to 1821 the church at Williamsboro had no minister. During this time the church building was used for secular meetings and entertainments and the building was sadly neglected. In 1821 the Rev. William Mercer Green, who had just been ordained deacon, took charge of the church. Two years prior to this time the congregation at Williamsboro had been officially recognized as a parish of the Diocese of North Carolina. Under the tireless efforts of the Rev. Mr. Green the parish was revived both spiritually and physically. In his report to the convention of 1823,

Green stated: "The Church at Williamsboro, which four years ago was a perfect ruin, has been thoroughly repaired, . . ." The following year the diocesan convention was held in Williamsboro, indicating the growth of this parish in importance.

Since the church at Williamsboro had been used occasionally for temporal purposes, the congregation felt that it should be reconsecrated. Accordingly, on October 16, 1825 Bishop Ravenscroft consecrated the church building which was officially given the name of St. John. The earliest record of it having been called St. John is in the diocesan convention journal for 1821. The choice of this name was quite natural since it was the name given the first parish established in Granville County.

In 1828 Bishop Ravenscroft moved his episcopal residence to Williamsboro and for a year served as rector of St. John's. From 1830 to 1870 St. John's had a succession of rectors who served the parish for periods of from one to seven years. Its history during these years was typical of most village parishes. Its membership averaged about fifteen communicants. In 1870 the Rev. William Shepherd Pettigrew, son of Bishop-Elect Charles Pettigrew, took charge of St. John's. His rectorate continued until his death in 1900. He was greatly beloved by all who knew him.

Following his death the congregation of St. John's steadily decreased as most of its members moved away. No regular services have been held in the church for some twenty years. The building is in such bad repair that it is unsafe to hold services in it. Fortunately, however, it has not yet reached the point that it cannot be restored to its original simple beauty.

After a careful examination of the church Mr. Thomas T. Waterman, the well-known authority on colonial architecture, reports: "This building dates from the middle of the 18th century and is a remarkable survival of a colonial church of its period. While simple in form, the woodwork, both exterior and interior, is extensive and well preserved. It constitutes the best exemplar of colonial church woodwork in North Carolina, as the other churches of the period have lost their interiors through alteration or fire."

"In form the building is rectangular, with its main axis east and west. Of frame construction, it is set on a high basement, all of original brickwork laid in Flemish bond, which only needs repair at the two north corners. The super-structure has high sidewalls and a gable roof, trimmed with a fine modillioned cornice at the eaves."

In closing his report Mr. Waterman says: "Both as an example of colonial church building in North Carolina and as a historic monument, the value of St. John's cannot be overestimated. Properly restored with an appropriate churchyard wall or fence and planting of old boxwood the church would be an important addition to North Carolina's architectural heritage."

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It is estimated that \$25,000 will be needed to carry out this work. Everyone who would like to help restore one of the few colonial churches left in North Carolina is asked to send a contribution to:

Mr. Frank B. Robards, Treasurer

Committee on the Restoration of St. John's Church
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